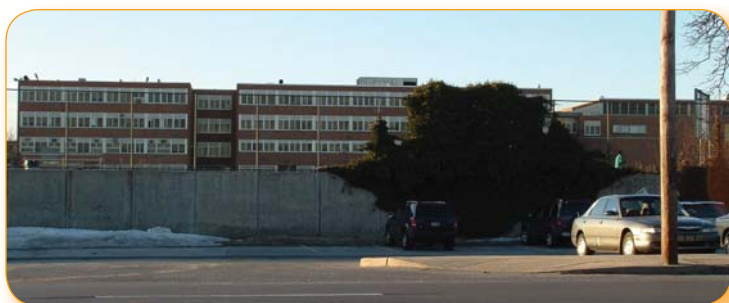


# Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School:

## The expectation is excellence



Exterior of Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School.

By Karin Chenoweth

**E**lmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School in Elmont, New York, is a big, intimidating brick building housing almost 2,000 students in seventh through 12th grades. It draws from surrounding neighborhoods of small, tidy, working class homes on narrow, densely packed streets in Nassau County, Long Island, just over the border from Queens and blocks from the Belmont Racetrack. About three-quarters of the students are African Americans. A sizable minority are recent immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa; 11 percent are Hispanic; and 11 percent Asian, Pacific Islander, or American Indian.

About 16 percent of the students qualify for free lunch, and another 8 percent qualify for reduced-price lunch, a measure of poverty. Between 11 and 20 percent of the students qualify for public assistance.

Unlike many other schools

the New York State Education Department identifies as “similar,” it posts very high achievement, with very small achievement gaps among groups of students. It also holds onto its students in much higher proportions than schools with similar demographics – its senior class is 83 percent the size of its freshman class – and 100 percent of its seniors graduate, 97 percent of whom go on to college.

“But we’re not aiming our students to go to college,” says Elmont’s principal, Al Harper.\* “We’re aiming higher than that – we’re aiming them at graduating from college.”

Partly for that reason, Elmont encourages students to take Advanced Placement classes and tests. In fact, Elmont was recently recognized by The College Board as the high school that gets more African-American students taking and passing (getting a score of 3 or higher) AP World History than any other school in the country (23 in 2004).

Harper has been principal for three years, but before

that he was assistant principal for nine years, and he has both been shaped by and has helped shape the culture of the school – a culture of high expectations where every student is expected to behave well and perform well, and where every teacher is expected to teach well.

At a lunchtime gathering of the school’s “cabinet,” – the principal, the three assistant principals, and the chairs of the departments – Peter Gaffney, the chair of the athletic department, described the culture of Elmont, to the approbation of his colleagues, as follows: “Mr. Harper sets the bar very high for the cabinet; the cabinet sets the bar high for the teachers; and the teachers set the bar high for the kids.”

Throughout the school, the emphasis is on instruction – instruction by teachers of students and by administrators of teachers.

“I taught in the city for four years and thought I was a pretty good teacher,” says eighth-grade English teacher Wendy Tague who came from teaching in New York City. “But until I came here I had never taught a lesson.”

She credits the intense system of observations by administrators with helping her become a better teacher. “We’re observed seven times a year until tenure, and, once tenured, we observe each other,” she says. The observation process is

\* Since this profile was completed, Al Harper has become a superintendent and John Capozzi has assumed the principalship of Elmont.

“designed to help the teacher,” she says.

That observation process is at the core of what Elmont is about, not only according to Tague but also according to Harper and his cabinet members.

Department chairs and assistant principals are responsible for observing lessons and making detailed suggestions for improvement in presentations, questioning techniques, how to engage students in the lesson, and more. A lesson which has very little to improve is often identified as needing to be taught to another teacher.

### The school's schedule is built around opportunities for teachers to work together.

Assistant Principal John Capozzi calls observation the “tool” for instructional growth. “Instruction drives the building,” he says. “We talk about it all day.” Before observing a teacher, for example, the observer is supposed to look at the previous observation to see what the recommendation for improvement was. “Next time, you want to see an improvement in that area.” A common “action plan” for new teachers is to observe other teachers teach a lesson in order to learn new techniques or strategies.

And the administrators themselves are expected to improve their observation techniques – periodically, lessons are videotaped and administrators all watch the lesson together, then write up their observations at home overnight. They then meet

the next day to discuss their observations. This way they develop insight into other ways to observe as well as other things to recommend.

Tague said that when she first arrived, she thought that a lesson might consist of introducing a poetic term to a class and giving a few examples from some poems. Now, she says, she knows that she needs to “scaffold learning” by linking back to previous lessons, making sure that each student understands the concept, and giving multiple opportunities to students to learn the term and incorporate it in their own

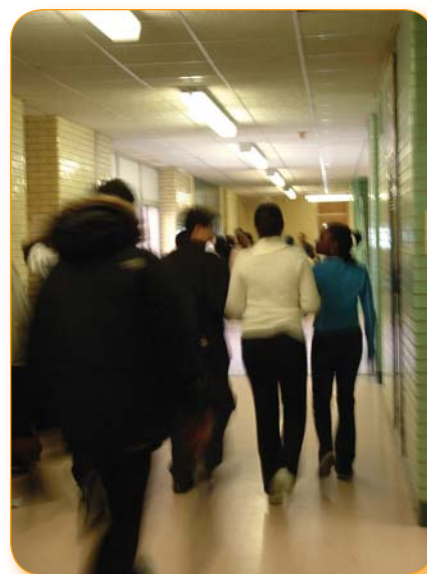
writing.

The systematic observation of teachers that Tague credits with helping her improve is one way it is clear that teachers at Elmont are considered to be part of a larger enterprise with a lot of support and encouragement, not punishment.

For example, a teacher whose class did less well on the Regents Exams or the Advanced Placement exams than was hoped is not assumed to have done something wrong, according to Harper. “How can you ask someone who has worked her heart out and tried so hard, ‘What went wrong?’ No, you sit down and say, ‘You did really well. Is there something more we can do?’”

“We are all responsible for training our teachers,” is the way Eileen Kramer, chair of the music department, puts it.

Put another way by George



Students pass between classes at Elmont.

Holub, an eighth-grade science teacher, “This school almost has a family atmosphere. A new teacher is taken under somebody’s wing.”

The school’s schedule is built around opportunities for teachers to work together. In the seventh and eighth grades, teachers are teamed in traditional middle school fashion (core subject teachers who all share a group of students), and the teams meet every day with a guidance counselor, who is an integral part of the team. Most of the discussion surrounds instruction, but the presence of the guidance counselor means that discussions of individual students can be followed up directly by the counseling department.

The seventh- and eighth-grade teachers “loop” with their students, meaning that the teachers who teach incoming seventh-graders move with them to eighth grade the following year and then drop back to seventh grade the following year. This way the students and teachers

develop strong personal and academic bonds that last through the high school years through hallway and after-school encounters.

In the high school grades,

**“We push our kids to excel in all their classes. If I hear that a student is arriving at gym unprepared, or isn’t doing well in art, I’ll ask him about that.”**

teachers meet by department and work on lessons, pacing, and assessments. They do not necessarily teach the same thing at the same time, but they are all aiming at the same goals.

New York has the well-known Regents Exams as the marker of whether students achieve academic success. The state established a lower score needed to receive a “local” diploma without a Regents endorsement. (For students entering ninth grade in 2001 and after, there will be no local diploma.) In 2003, nine students earned a local diploma at Elmont. No students at Elmont received a local diploma in 2004, and 69 percent of them earned a Regents diploma, which means that they passed at least five Regents exams with a score of 65 or above. (Now, all diplomas will be Regents diplomas, and the number to watch will be “Regents Diplomas with Advanced Designation.”)

Even that doesn’t quite tell the story. On the math exam, 28 percent of the students earned above an 85 in Math A, the math that is required of students. And Elmont has steadily increased the number of students taking Math B, the higher math sequence

that leads to pre-calculus or calculus. Of the 86 students who took Math B in 2004, 94 percent scored above a 65 and a full third of the students scored above an 85.

In English, 96 percent of the students (including 78 percent of the students with disabilities) scored above a 65, and 65 percent scored above an 85. Contrast that with the Humanities and the Arts Magnet (the former Andrew Jackson High School), just down the street a few blocks in Queens, where only about half the freshman class graduates within four years, only 23 percent of the graduates earned a Regents Diploma, and fewer than a dozen kids scored above an 85 in math and English.

The Regents Exams provide a focus around which instruction is organized, but

teachers at Elmont bristle at the thought that they care only about the Regents scores. “Many classes culminate in Regents exams,” says the chair of the English department, Alicia Calabrese. “But many don’t. We push our kids to excel in all their classes. If I hear that a student is arriving at gym unprepared, or isn’t doing well in art, I’ll ask him about that.”

Teachers can be carefully selected because each opening has an average of 350 applicants. “Teachers have heard about Elmont and want to work here,” says Harper. Department chairs sort through the applications and forward about eight to the appropriate assistant principal, who will ask the applicants to teach sample lessons. Two applicants will then be forwarded to the principal, who interviews the finalists to see if they have an “Elmont heart.”

“I know they have the content knowledge and the skills,” he says, because of the vetting they have already undergone. “I’m looking for



An English class reading *Macbeth*.

intangibles – can they teach with their heart, not their head?” Questions he asks include, for example, what teachers would do if one of their students were struggling, and how the teacher would reach out to the student’s parents.

They are also forewarned about the intense system of observations and the expectation that everyone is expected to improve. Assistant Principal Capozzi says, “Before they ever begin here, we explain this is an ongoing learning experience, and it should never stop.”

By taking such care with hiring, Elmont is sure to begin with a teaching staff committed to working together, improving instruction, and having high expectations for the students.

But that doesn’t mean they are ready for all the challenges of teaching in a large, urban high school. Harper tells of a second-year teacher who came into his office crying, saying she couldn’t stand it any more and was quitting. “I had the department chair cover her class and we talked for an hour,” Harper remembers. “We buddied her up with another teacher, we had the chairperson work with her, we worked on lesson plans with her, we had a number of intensive interventions.”

Today, several years later, Harper says, “She is the most improved teacher I have ever seen. Her [students’] assessment results this year are through the roof.”

That intense kind of commitment produces the kind of social atmosphere where staff members regularly have barbecues and Christmas

parties together. During the winter break toward the end of February 2005, the principal and several staff members with their families — a total of 35 people — traveled together to spend a week at the beach in the Dominican Republic. “People who work together and like each other and have a common goal, get together,” Harper says. The science department started out having a bagel day once a month and now they have an elaborate monthly “fete.”

When some students at the school wanted to do something to help the victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami, Harper worked with them to put on a Saturday morning pancake breakfast to raise money. One man ladeling the batter was unfamiliar to him — “He was the boyfriend of one of our new teachers. That’s the kind of school this is,” Harper said.

Teachers chuckle when

Harper says, with tongue slightly in cheek, “We have no discipline problems.” But they agree that discipline problems are not a constant plague, as they are in many nearby schools.

For the most part, students show up for class and they do the work asked of them. Not only that, but many of them are in the school building long after classes end, as part of clubs, sports, or getting help from teachers. “We keep our kids very active,” says

Harper. As an example, any student who wants to play basketball makes the team — the athletic department simply hires more coaches to accommodate the numbers. “We don’t cut anyone,” the head of the athletic department says. Assistant Principal Mary Hannon says, “The child who is involved in music or sports is more successful. It is part and parcel of a full education.” Other teachers refer to the full set of after-school activities as Elmont’s “hidden curriculum,” and part of where Elmont students develop their intense relationships with the school and their strong sense of belonging and sportsmanship. Harper brags that other principals often praise his students for their excellent behavior at sporting events.

Capozzi, who handles many of the school’s discipline problems, says he is on the constant alert for problems.



The AP World History class engages in discussion.

Some of the kids at Elmont, he says, are “tough” kids. But if a student doesn’t respond well to a greeting in the hallway — for example, if he doesn’t smile back, or doesn’t quickly take off a hat when reminded, Capozzi will invite that child into his office where he tries

to see if there is a problem bothering him or her. Often he will find there is a problem at home or elsewhere, and he is able to deploy a counselor or social worker to help. When one student's family was about to become homeless, the school social worker connected the family to county resources to help them stay housed.

This could be viewed as the school discipline version of the "broken window" theory of policing, where very small signs of unhappiness or unrest are taken seriously.

New students who are unused to the atmosphere at Elmont, Capozzi says, sometimes "have to be Elmontized" before their behavior is acceptable. "The goal of discipline is to change the behavior," Capozzi says.

Elmont has its share of suspensions – 257 in 2004. But, Harper says, "I've seen [Mr. Capozzi] suspend a student," Harper says, and "the student thanks him." Harper attributes that to the respect and concern that Capozzi has, even for students he is suspending.

Another example of the way discipline is thought of is the way the school uses the academic ineligibility rule. As at many other schools, if students at Elmont are failing more than two classes or don't maintain a 2.0 grade point average, they are not permitted to participate in sports or other extra-curricular activities or even attend sporting events.

But, Capozzi says, "We have a review board, and more often than not we'll grant a waiver," meaning that students sign an academic contract agreeing to get back on track. Capozzi

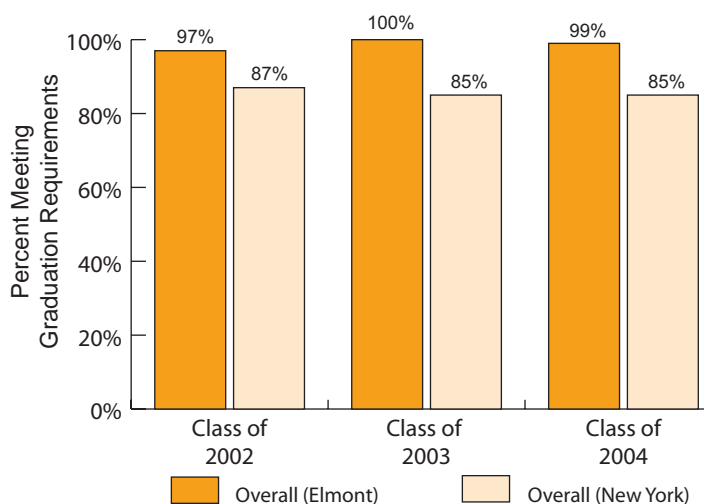
and a counselor as well as teachers are on the review board, and students write a letter explaining what caused their failures. Sometimes it's an illness in the family or some other reason and, Assistant Principal Hannon says, "At times like that, we wouldn't want to take the student away from his teammates and the support they can provide."

In other words, the school uses the academic ineligibility

rule as a way to identify students who may need extra help and as a teaching tool, not as a punishment. As a result, only about 3 percent of the students are ineligible to participate in after-school activities.

This goes along with what Harper says is his philosophy of discipline: "If you treat that child the way you want your child to be treated, you'll always be right."

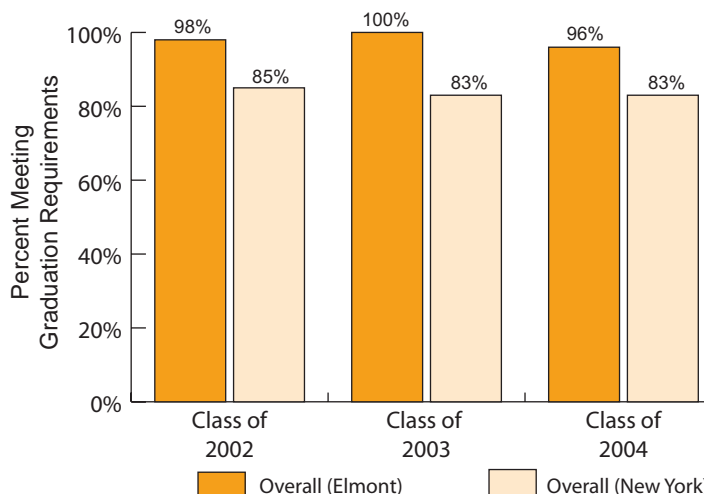
## Regents English Exam



Source: New York State School Report Card, <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/irts/reportcard/>

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## Regents Math Exam



Source: New York State School Report Card, <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/irts/reportcard/>

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Harper and Capozzi give another example of how this philosophy has worked. A football player who graduated several years ago and is about to graduate from Lehigh University with a degree in engineering was going to have to give up football while at Elmont because he needed to watch his younger sister during the afternoons. “All we did was let him leave and get his sister, who sat and did her homework in the end zone,” Capozzi says. “After a while, we had a day care in the end zone,” because other players had the same issue, and high school volunteer tutors worked with the younger children on their work.

“You’ve got to do everything to help every single student,” says Capozzi.

“We don’t have discipline issues because [students] are focused on achievement,” says Harper.

Harper, Capozzi, and the others at Elmont know that the

**“When you believe they can do that, they rise to the challenge.”**

stakes are high for today’s high school students. They need a good education, and Elmont is where they need to get it. Thus, expectations are extremely high for students.

“We push our kids to excel,” says the English department chair Cabrese. “When you believe they can do that, they rise to the challenge.”

It is the culture of high expectations that makes a difference, according to the head of the math department, Anthony Murray, who taught for years in the New York City system. “The kids are the same

wherever you go,” he says. “But the expectations are different.”

Those expectations are clear in the classrooms. But it isn’t just about expectations – it is about careful instruction to meet those expectations.

In a 12th-grade Advanced Placement English composition class, for example, Pat O’Leary told her students about a reading passage from Cormac McCarthy’s “The Crossing” that had been used in a previous Advanced Placement exam. “This is a challenging piece,” she told the class. “You’re up to the challenge.” She then gives the students time to read and discuss the piece in small groups, as she travels among the groups gathering comments and insights that she shares with the class, leading the students to deeper understandings of the text.

In an 11th-grade “core” class (Elmont has two levels of classes – core, or Regents, and advanced, which includes the Advanced Placement classes)

– teacher Kevin Sullivan leads students through a reading of *Macbeth*. Sullivan asks different students to read different parts, and he takes on the part of the third witch. It is the scene where the witches first see Macbeth and Macduff, and make their acerbic observations and predictions.

Every few sentences, Sullivan stops to scaffold the learning for students. “Let’s break that down,” he says, or, “I want to paraphrase that,” or “Let’s tap into social studies – what’s treason?”

To the line, “Lesser than

Macbeth and greater,” Sullivan asks, “How can someone be lesser than Macbeth and greater?” One student, slouching and mumbling slightly, says, “He might have a lesser title or position, but might be a better man.”

“That’s brilliant,” Sullivan says.

This particular class had taken the Regents Exam earlier in the year, and 92 percent passed, 52 percent at the “mastery” level – that is, with a score of 85 or above.

To enliven his presentation, Sullivan projected images loaded onto the computer to show students paintings of the three witches by different artists with different ideas of what they were like. The students gasped at the hideous bearded images.

Most classrooms at Elmont are equipped with projectors that permit teachers to show short video clips, documents or artwork, often found by the school librarian, who helps teachers find interesting materials that illustrate lessons.

In a 10th-grade chemistry class, Michelle Seeley teaches a lesson about the behavior of ideal gases by comparing them to “ideal boyfriends,” ensuring that students understand that under some circumstances (low pressure in the case of gases; being in the presence of parents in the case of boyfriends), gases and boyfriends are more likely to behave in an ideal fashion. Although seemingly frivolous, the comparison made for a vivid mnemonic device.

In Michael Indovino’s Advanced Placement World History class (this is the class

that in 2004 achieved College Board distinction mentioned earlier), Indovino links a discussion of the kitchen debate between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev back to previous lessons about Stalin, the USSR, Castro and the Spanish-American War before reading part of the debate, explaining any word that he thinks might cause problems in understanding.

Walking through the halls and glancing into classrooms reveals lively instruction going on all through the school — students are attentive, teachers are talking, listening, or moving among groups of students to see if anyone needs help.

When asked what makes the difference at Elmont, Harper credits school system unity, including a supportive school board and superintendent. He also credits the teachers and his administrative staff and the students themselves.

“It’s not magic,” he says. “It’s hard work.”

A product of the New York City school system (Andrew Jackson High School, just

blocks away from Elmont) with degrees from Howard University, Adelphi University, the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and St. John’s University, Harper is passionate about the need to make sure all kids get a good education and the need to make changes in the way children are now educated.

**“It’s not magic. It’s hard work.”**

“You can change it, you must change it,” Harper says.

Harper dismisses all talk of the difficulties of getting poor children to meet high standards. “Because a child is poor doesn’t mean he can’t learn. Because a child lives in the projects doesn’t mean he can’t learn. If there are gaps, we as a society must fill those gaps.”

He knows that many teachers around the country have become discouraged and will often blame kids for low performance.

“If you say ‘the kids, the kids,’ you’ll be there forever. We know that kids who are failing are not doing their work. We know they’re not coming for extra help. We know that. That’s a given. But what are we doing instructionally in the classroom, what are we doing to make sure the kids are learning? If you have good teachers doing good, exciting instruction, kids will learn.”

And, he adds, if a teacher doesn’t believe all children can learn, “He should be in a different business. He should work for IBM or another big company. He shouldn’t be a teacher.”

He has little patience for those who argue that schools cannot be expected to make up for the deficits that poverty and discrimination cause.

If we were to agree with that proposition, he says, “As a country we [would be] condemning a whole group of people to not getting an education. We [would be] condemning our Black and Hispanic youth to menial jobs — at best — and to never attaining the American dream.”